

# Historians and the Social Capital Debate:

## A Preliminary Survey

Takeshi NAGASHIMA<sup>†</sup>

The last twenty years has seen lively debate on the topic of "social capital" in social sciences. Beyond the academic world, the topic has also attracted much interest among policy makers, the media, and within international organizations like the World Bank.<sup>1</sup> One also comes across researches that incorporate this concept in the field of economic and social history. But these writings are still so scattered that it is difficult to find them without deliberate searching, and most historians go about their work indifferent to the term "social capital." Borrowing the words of Dario Gaggio, it seems like historians have not yet jumped on the "bandwagon" of social capital theory. But is it even something that historians should take part in? The British journal *Social History* presented a discussion on this very topic between Gaggio, who basically believes that historians should get on board with the concept, and Ben Fine, who suggests there is not much point in jumping on this trend.<sup>2</sup> While touching briefly on the discussion between Gaggio and Fine as a reference, this paper will look for intersections between social capital theory and historical studies, paying particular attention to the discussion about Italian history opened up by Robert Putnam.

### Continuity and discontinuity of civic traditions in Italy

Putnam's monograph, *Making Democracy Work* (1993), which has made a major contribution to the spread of the social capital concept, deals with history.<sup>3</sup> The central thesis of this book is the performance of democracy in Italian regions over a twenty-year period beginning in 1970, when the country introduced a new system of regional government. Moreover, the scope covered by this book extends beyond the modern to the medieval. Putnam argues that the performance of democracy in each of the regions today owes much to the historical accumulation of "social capital." As is widely known, Putnam looked for the roots of the different political cultures in

---

<sup>†</sup> Associate Professor of Economic History, Senshu University

<sup>1</sup> J. Field, *Social Capital*, 2nd. edn. (Abingdon, 2008), pp.4-5.

<sup>2</sup> D. Gaggio, "Do Social Historians Need Social Capital?" *Social History* 29:4 (2004), pp.499-513; B. Fine, "Social Capital versus Social History," *Social History*, 33:4 (2008), pp. 442-467.

<sup>3</sup> R. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, 1993).

northern and southern Italy, by tracing their origins back to the eleventh century, finding a feudalistic system of control in the south and a communal republicanism that came to maturity in the north under commune-republics. He has argued that the relatively satisfactory institutional performance of the contemporary northern and central regions is due to the social capital that had accumulated in the form of trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks of civic engagement that encouraged voluntary cooperation among the citizenry.

This clear argument has attracted the attention of many people. But at the same time, it can be recognized that there are some problems. Pointing the finger at traditions for the state of affairs today in government and society is somewhat fatalistic, and Putnam's argument has frequently been criticized on this point. In the extreme, it can be boiled down to the argument that the fate of the southern regions, where democracy is viewed as having performed poorly, may have been determined sometime in the Middle Ages and, therefore, they may not catch up to the northern regions for another few centuries.<sup>4</sup>

In 1999, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* assembled a special issue titled, "Patterns of social capital: Stability and change in historical perspective."<sup>5</sup> Social capital was seen as a suitable topic of debate for the journal that aspires to be a venue for interdisciplinary discussion concerning social, demographic, political, economic, cultural, and technological history. The editor of this special issue, Robert Rotberg, originally specialized in international politics, has demonstrated his prowess as a facilitator of interdisciplinary and international dialogs.<sup>6</sup> This special issue was a compilation of 15 essays concerning Europe, America, Australia, and Asia, including one by Putnam (with Gerald Gamm) about the rise of voluntary associations in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Three of the essays were about Italy, and they encourage readers to reconsider Putnam's arguments.

Let us briefly look at the essay contributed by Gene Brucker, who focuses on Renaissance Florence. Brucker charges that Putnam's emphasis on the egalitarian aspects of the northern Italian communes presents an over-idealized view of the communes. According to Brucker, it has become apparent, due to recent developments in historical researches, that the city-states of the Renaissance (typified by Florence) can no longer simply be portrayed as hothouses of progress and innovation (i.e. the emergence from the medieval "Dark Ages") as had been done

---

<sup>4</sup> Putnam himself has noted complains from some regional government officials in southern Italy. *Ibid.*, p.183

<sup>5</sup> R.I. Rotberg, "Social Capital and Political Culture in Africa, America, Australasia, and Europe," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 29:3&4 (1999), pp. 339-356. Later published in book form as R.I. Rotberg (ed.), *Patterns of Social Capital: Stability and Change in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, 2000). This volume also included L.W. Pye's essay, "Civility, Social Capital, and Civil Society: Three Powerful Concepts for Explaining Asia", pp.375-394, which, although not discussed herein, is a useful reference when examining "social capital" in Asia.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of this interdisciplinary/international discussion of history include: R.I. Rotberg and T. Rabb (eds.), *Hunger and History: The Impact of Changing Food Production and Consumption Patterns on Society* (Cambridge, 1985); R.I. Rotberg (ed.), *Health and Disease in Human History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

<sup>7</sup> G. Gamm and R.D. Putnam, "The Growth of Voluntary Associations in America, 1840-1940," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 29:4 (1999), pp. 511-557.

by the nineteenth century Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt.<sup>8</sup> The commune-republics were brutal, authoritarian, and rife with factional conflict. This is true, for example, of Florence under the control of the Medici family. The city-states of northern Italy were basically authoritarian, rather than republican, and this continued through to the mid-nineteenth century *Risorgimento* movement led by Giuseppe Garibaldi. The transition from a vertical social order to horizontal social relationships only began occurring substantially in the nineteenth century, and even then it progressed only slowly. In this respect, the north and south of Italy do not differ greatly.<sup>9</sup> Given the fact that I do not specialize in Italian history, it would be hasty for me to make any judgments, but at the very least I am compelled to note that there is debate among historians regarding the nature of the Italian city republics. If we are to give serious consideration to the findings of the re-examinations of history offered up by Brucker and others, our impression is that it is going too far to assert that there is a legacy from the Middle Ages; that is to say, that there is a continuity from the twelfth century in civic traditions resulting in the accumulation of social capital.<sup>10</sup>

I am personally interested in how the arrival of bubonic plague in the mid fourteenth century affected the Italian commune-republics. The commonly accepted history of public health policy tells us that at this great calamity the city-states, starting with Venice, used heavy-handed measures such as quarantines, and oppressed and excluded the poor and outsiders (e.g. religious pilgrims).<sup>11</sup> Putnam notes that the spread of plague served to "undermine the spirit of the civic community and the stability of the republican government," and it "sapped civic energies." And yet, Putnam's account does not seem to make it clear how this tradition of republicanism in the northern cities was maintained and recurred.<sup>12</sup> Even if it is true that the "ideal" of republicanism was maintained, it must also be recognized that the Florence of the Medici family was born from the "reality" of factional conflict and authoritarianism, as observed by Brucker.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than examining and analyzing primary sources, Putnam mainly relied on secondary literature for his study of Italian history before the nineteenth century, and in this respect he is in a somewhat different position from expert historical researchers who read primary sources

---

<sup>8</sup> J. Burckhardt, *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860).

<sup>9</sup> G. Brucker, "Civic Traditions in Premodern Italy," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 29:3 (1999), pp. 357-378.

<sup>10</sup> Although Putnam refers to the social conflict and violence, the gap between the rich and poor, factional conflict, and autocratic governments of the northern communes (Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, pp.129-137), the discussion always tends to focus on the continuity, rather than the discontinuity, of civic traditions in the north.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g. D. Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times* (London, 1999), pp. 34-38.

<sup>12</sup> Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> At the time he was writing this book, Putnam had not yet divided the concept of social capital into "bonding" and "bridging" types. However, these concepts may be useful for bringing a discussion of factional conflict within range.

and engage in frequent debate with other experts. Certainly, to present alluring historical theories there is a need for the kind of "tour de force" that is not too obsessed with detail. However, it is possible to be too audacious and pick and choose only the events that support the theory. And it is only natural that experts who are well versed in the details and various aspects of these eras and regions should refute these theories. Of course, however, history should not be considered the sole province of the researchers who specialize in a particular era or region. In this respect, even if it seemed somewhat biased, Putnam's polemic, which took advantage of the work of historians, is something that should be welcomed. This is because it can provoke productive debate among those who approach history from various angles.

### **Civic traditions and socio-economic development**

Putnam discusses the relationship between civic engagement on the one hand, and socio-economic development (economic development and public welfare) on the other, in the time since Italian unification (1870). Given my own interest in similar issues concerning modern England and Japan, I was particularly interested in this part of Putnam's work.

With materials in hand, Putnam employed quantitative analysis for the modern era. He used the membership of mutual aid societies, the membership of cooperatives, the longevity of local associations, the strength of the mass parties, and election turnouts as indicators of social capital in the form of "civic involvement". He then compared the measured/indexed level of civic involvement in each region for the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century to the same indicators for the modern era (1970 onwards), as well as the ratio of agricultural and industrial employment (an indicator of the industrial revolution, in other words, economic development) and the infant mortality rates (a surrogate variable for public welfare and social development) in both eras. The correlation between the level of "civic involvement" in the two eras appears to suggest a continuity in the north-south disparities in civic traditions since the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

With respect to the relationships between "civic involvement," "economic development," and "public welfare," it had been widely believed that greater "civic involvement" is a function of progress in "economic development." However, Putnam's analysis shows that the level of "economic development" in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries does not necessarily correlate to the level of "civic involvement" in the later periods. If anything, it is the level of "civic involvement" in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that has the power to predict the future, and there is a strong correlation between the level of "civic involvement" in the late nineteenth century and today's levels of "economic development" and "public welfare." The implication is that increased "civic involvement" is critical for "economic development" and "public welfare."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148-151.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156-158, especially Figure 5.6.

Putnam's observations have deep implications in terms of liberating "civic involvement" from a simplistic economic determinism. Civic involvement can certainly no longer be considered simply a dependent variable of economic development. However, if one were to go beyond this to advocate a "civic involvement" determinism based solely on this correlation, it would be far from convincing.

For example, if it emerged that there is statistically a high degree of correlation between the level of "civic involvement" in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and today's infant mortality rate, what would that mean? There is a complete lack of context linking the two. Linking two distinct periods in time seems ahistorical. In view of the fact that the activities of voluntary associations targeting on maternal and infant health played a certain role in reducing infant mortality in England and Japan,<sup>16</sup> it is conceivable that this could also be the case in Italy. However, it is impossible to know the relative importance of such organizations in Putnam's "civic involvement" score. Furthermore, the maternal and infant health activities of civic organizations were certainly not the only factor in the decline of infant mortality. A variety of intertwining factors (e.g. nutritional status of the mother and child, living environment, epidemics, economic conditions, sanitary conditions, healthcare, and government policy) affect the infant mortality rates, and the way that these factors come together may differ depending on the time and the location. Just as "civic involvement" and "economic development" have different dynamics, the possibility must be considered that the infant mortality rate, which is used as an indicator of "public welfare," also has its own unique dynamics. This is not to say that they are unrelated, but merely to point out that there is much room for further research.

In fact, Putnam himself is aware that this two-variable model was too simplistic, saying, "Much finer-grained studies (including studies at the subregional level) would be necessary to substantiate the broad historical argument we have sketched."<sup>17</sup>

Shedding light on the relationship between "social capital" as exhibited in "civic involvement" on the one hand and economic development and living conditions on the other through "finer-grained" analysis is a important subject that should be tackled by historians.<sup>18</sup>

### **Applicability of social capital concepts to history**

Although it aroused interest among historians in social capital theory, Gaggio's essay published in the journal *Social History* was nonetheless critical of Putnam's thesis. Looking at modern Italian history, Gaggio's area of specialization, using Putnam's thesis it is hard to explain why

---

<sup>16</sup> H. Marland, "A Pioneer in Infant Welfare: The Huddersfield Scheme 1903–1920," *Social History of Medicine* 6 (1993), pp. 25–50; O. Saito, "Infant mortality and Aiku village schemes in prewar Japan (in Japanese)," *Socio-Economic History* (in Japanese) 73:6 (2008), pp. 33–55.

<sup>17</sup> Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, p. 161.

<sup>18</sup> See S. Szreter, *Health and Wealth: Studies in History and Policy* (Rochester, 2005), especially Chapter 9, "Health by Association? Social Capital, Social Theory, and the Political Economy of Public Health," for an example of how this discussion is proceeding in Britain.

northern Italian civil society was a hotbed of fascism in the 1920s and how it is that the current prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, came from the north.<sup>19</sup>

According to Gaggio, Putnam's historical treatise on Italy seems to focus on a "mentalité of civility" that is anchored in the so-called *longue durée* of historian Fernand Braudel, a leader of France's Annales School. Gaggio claims that Putnam clung excessively to this notion of continuity and that he had a propensity to ignore the contexts of the eras that have come and gone since the Middle Ages and the roles played by various actors.<sup>20</sup> In any event, it is not as if Putnam's social capital theory offered some kind of consistent historical perspective. For example, when he discusses social capital in the United States, he has not made an issue of long-term continuities and, if anything, he focuses on generational changes.<sup>21</sup>

Gaggio observes that the accumulation of social capital (i.e. trust and norms of reciprocity) that Putnam found in Italian history is based on the assumption of social integration and equilibrium. He particularly questions Putnam's functionalistic understanding of society. Because it presupposes a society that is integrated and in equilibrium, it tends to disregard social conflicts and nonfunctional elements, and it lacks a viewpoint from which to ask about the forces that drive historical changes. As a result, Putnam's concept of social capital is incompatible with historical analysis, he says.<sup>22</sup> Thus Gaggio's critique is not just a critique from an empirical viewpoint; it is a critique of the very concept itself.

Gaggio frames the debate over the concept of social capital as put forward by Putnam, James Coleman, and Pierre Bourdieu around three controversial points.<sup>23</sup>

(1) Who possesses social capital? The debate is over whether it should be seen as a public good on the one hand or a social relationship that serves as a private good that benefits individuals on the other. It is Coleman who defined social capital as a public good and Putnam is heir to this view. Quoting from Alejandro Portes, Gaggio is critical of this interpretation. He notes that because society provides benefits to society, there is no differentiation between cause and effect, resulting in logical circularity.

(2) How is social capital created? Is social capital something that is intentionally created or is it something that is not created deliberately by someone? Coleman and Putnam's social capital as a "public good" basically falls into the latter category. For example, at the micro level, people do not necessarily send their children to a certain school or participate in civic activities hoping to obtain social capital. If anything, people send their children to school or participate in civic activities to fulfil their own goals, and this in turn results in the formation of the social capital that benefits society as a whole. However, according to Gaggio, this means that individual behaviour is seen simply as a function of society. Gaggio's main criticism is that because

---

<sup>19</sup> Gaggio, *op.cit.*, p. 508.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.507-508.

<sup>21</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Gaggio, *op.cit.*, p. 510.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 502-506.

Coleman and Putnam have a homogeneous understanding of the roles and behaviour of individuals, they are unable to tackle questions about clashing interests between people and groups, the independent intentions and behaviours of various actors, and differences in resource allocation.

(3) What consequences does social capital produce? Like Coleman, Putnam initially emphasized only the positive social and economic benefits. Many subsequent authors have noted the negative aspects of social capital, including exclusivity, costliness (transaction costs), and burdening and stifling members of society. Accepting some of this criticism, Putnam has come up with the concepts of exclusive "bonding" social capital and more open "bridging" social capital. Meanwhile, however, if social capital is not something that is non-exclusive, the "public good" definition seems problematical.

Gaggio is critical of the Coleman/Putnam school of thought that sees social capital as a "public good" that is formed unintentionally and as a resource that is allocated functionally, and he thinks that it is unsuited to historical studies. By contrast, Gaggio applauds the school of thought that sees social capital as something that is created and held intentionally by individuals and networks. Bourdieu is the leading proponent of this view.<sup>24</sup> If the latter approach is taken, it becomes possible to question the political economy surrounding the conflict and inequalities within a society.<sup>25</sup> In order to examine the clash of values and interests between people and networks, and the associated exogenous factors, and to look at how these are rectified and how they change over time, it is necessary to ask what social capital means to different people. Accordingly, instead of presuming from the outset that social capital is something that is good for the public, when examining historical changes it is more useful to use a concept that begins with the assumption that it is individual private property. Gaggio has applied this type of social capital concept to his own empirical research about the development of small and medium-sized firm districts in post-war northern and central Italy.<sup>26</sup>

Gaggio asserts that this limited concept of social capital is useful in the study of history, while Ben Fine, whose essay appeared also in *Social History*, argues that historians have no need for social capital theory in their research. Rather than a historian, Fine is a political

---

<sup>24</sup> Nan Lin has been attempting to devise a more refined theory that treats social capital as the social relationships held by individuals. See N. Lin, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action* (Cambridge, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Gaggio, *op.cit.*, pp. 510-511. Bourdieu's original interest was the question of reproduction of social classes.

<sup>26</sup> D. Gaggio, *In Gold We Trust: Social Capital and Economic Change in the Italian Jewelry Towns* (Princeton, 2007). Sheilagh Ogilvie's research on the German guilds can also be seen as an application of social capital theory based on this understanding. See S. Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford, 2003); S. Ogilvie, "Guilds, Efficiency, and Social Capital: Evidence from German Proto-Industry," *Economic History Review* 57 (2002); S. Ogilvie, "Serfdom and Social Capital in Bohemia and Russia," *Economic History Review* 60 (2007), pp. 513-544. See also M. Tanimoto (ed.), *The Role of Tradition in Japan's Industrialization: Another Path to Industrialization* (Oxford, 2006), for research that refers to how local "social capital" was involved in industrial development in modern Japan.



economist taking a critical stand on "orthodox economics," and prior to publishing this essay in *Social History* he had earlier published a monograph that seriously criticized social capital theory.<sup>27</sup> Fine's radical criticism of social capital theory goes beyond the issue of whether it should be applied to historical studies. Fine calls the deployment of micro-economic reasoning to explain all sorts of social phenomena that have been the subject of other academic disciplines "economics imperialism," and he sees social capital theory as one example of this "colonization" of other disciplines by economics. Ultimately, the subject of Fine's criticism is Coleman for his presupposition of methodological individualism and rational choice theory. Building upon the human capital theory of Chicago economist Gary Becker, Coleman discussed "social capital" as public good embedded in society, which encompasses the norms and trust that governs the individual behaviour motivated by self-interest.<sup>28</sup>

Fine is generally in agreement with the point of view expressed by Gaggio with respect to the Coleman (and Putnam) current of social capital theory. Because this current of thought presupposes individual rational choice and social equilibrium, it is ill-suited to detailed analyses in social history dealing with various aspects of power, class, race, gender, conflict between interests and values, and their historical changes. But Fine is also critical of the propensity of social capital concept to keep expanding without apparent limit in order to gobble up a broad array of "political economy" issues, as it seems to have invited theoretical chaos.<sup>29</sup>

In view of his understanding of "economics imperialism," it is only natural that Fine is critical of "new economic history" that applies the methods and logic of "orthodox economics" to history. Interestingly, however, Fine doubts that social capital becomes entrenched as a concept among new economic historians. Peter Temin, who served as chairman of the Economic History Association, has pointed out the importance of considering cultural factors within the framework of economic history, and he raised Putnam's social capital as one element of this. He speculated that, as was the case in northern and southern Italy, differential economic development in various countries or regions could be connected to the state of social capital (for example, Japan's "collective culture").<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding Temin's suggestion, Fine questions whether the concept of social capital will become entrenched in economic history because the new economic historians already have a separate, flexible concept for incorporating non-economic factors. That is the idea of "institutions." The new economic historians have been incorporating what is really Temin's "culture" as "institutional" factors into their models since it was proposed by Douglass North, who, along with Robert Fogel, became the first economic historians to receive the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences.<sup>31</sup> This means that there

---

<sup>27</sup> B. Fine, *Social Capital versus Social Theory: Political Economy and Social Science at the Turn of the Millennium* (London, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Fine, "Social Capital versus Social History", pp. 457-458. The pros and cons of this debate are far beyond the scope of this paper, so I will not delve further into it.

<sup>29</sup> Fine, "Social Capital versus Social History," p. 445.

<sup>30</sup> P. Temin, "Is it Kosher to Talk about Culture?," *Journal of Economic History*, 57 (1997), pp. 267-287.

<sup>31</sup> D. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge, 1990).



is little incentive to adopt the concept of social capital this late in the game.<sup>32</sup>

Fine is critical of the Coleman-Putnam current of "functionalistic" social capital theory, but he gives the Bourdieuan interpretation some credit for having the potential of restoring "context" to social capital. He is in agreement with Gaggio up to this point. However, he says that Bourdieu's notion of social capital also has serious weaknesses. Bourdieu posits three types of capital ("economic capital," "cultural capital," and "social capital"), but according to Fine, Bourdieu is vague about relationship between "economic capital," which is seen as the basis for the other two forms of capital, and the development of "capitalism." Their differing opinions of Bourdieu are what divide Gaggio, who is enthusiastic about applying some elements of social capital theory to history, and Fine, who is generally sceptical. In any case, Fine is not necessarily opposed to the application of the Bourdieuan concept to historical analysis, as suggested by Gaggio. However, he appears to believe that applying this concept of social capital in the absence of a larger context would ultimately yield more than just a bag of disparate case studies.<sup>33</sup>

Fine suggests that aside from applying the Bourdieuan concept as done by Gaggio and others, there are three possible directions that can be taken in the relationship between economic and social historians and social capital theory. The first is the possibility that social capital will become entrenched as a concept that will complement or substitute "institutions," mainly in new economic history. The second is the possibility that most historians will continue to ignore social capital theory. And the third is the possibility that historians will critically test social capital theory from the outside and offer constructive alternatives. The gist of Fine's essay is that the third option is preferable.<sup>34</sup>

### **History of *sociabilité***

Each historian has a different way of dealing with social scientific theories and concepts. Many of historians (and I count myself as one) may be interested in them rather than committed to them. But, even if it is not explicit, in many cases, we refer to theory when we discover issues that require us to adjust the reasoning behind our working hypotheses. The British historian Peter Burke has explained this situation using Malthus's population theory as an example. Reading Malthus motivates historians, even those who do not accept Malthus's views, to study the changing relationship between population and means of subsistence. This sort of relationship with theory has surely enriched the practice of history.<sup>35</sup> In this respect, even if the historian does not expressly employ the concept of social capital in his own historical analyses, like Gaggio, it can be useful when the historian gains insights from the concept or from the discussion

---

<sup>32</sup> Fine, "Social Capital versus Social History", pp. 458-460.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 463-465.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 465-466.

<sup>35</sup> P. Burke, *History and Social Theory*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 2005), p.18. In this second edition, Burke has added a section about social capital theory (pp.70-73) that was not in the first edition published in 1992.

surrounding it. And even if one stays away from the kind of radical criticism of the concept that is levelled by Fine, it is possible to contribute to the discussion of social capital by examining its merits and demerits on the basis of empirical researches. As it happens, social ties and civic associations have been one of the main themes in the study of history, and there is a mass of research on this subject.

Putnam went back in history to look for the causes of the regional differences in democracy in 1970s Italy, and he hit upon the "accumulation of social capital" in northern and central Italy. There must be many social historians who get the feeling that they have heard a similar story somewhere when they learn about how Putnam's research unfolded. In 1966, looking for the reasons behind the politicization and democratization of the people in the rural areas of Provence during France's Second Republic, French historian Maurice Agulhon deduced the role of the social ties that were particular to southern France, with a variety of *associations* at their core, that supported a tradition of republicanism dating back to the eighteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Agulhon called this "*sociabilité*," and this term has resonated with historians not just in France, but around the world. The motive of Agulhon, who is renowned among social historians as the father of "*sociabilité*" concept, and that of Putnam's Italian research are not merely similar. Putnam was clearly inspired by Agulhon. Agulhon's southern France and Putnam's northern Italy are geographic neighbours. According to Putnam, it was claims for the "principle of *associazione*" that propelled the political unification of Italy during the Risorgimento period, and this resembles the situation in Agulhon's Provence; that is to say, the various association movements (i.e. cultural mobilization) of the first half the nineteenth century set the stage for the political mobilization of 1848. Putnam writes that "Italian social historiography of this period awaits its Agulhon" who will advance the study of Italian social history.<sup>37</sup>

The concept of "*sociabilité*," first coined by Agulhon as a historical term, has also had a major impact on the study of history in Japan. The term "*sociabilité*" is most often translated into Japanese as "*shakaiteki-ketsugou*" ("social cohesion") or "*shakaiteki-chutai*" ("social ties"), but it can be translated differently depending on what sort of meaning is attached. In other words, like "social capital," "*sociabilité*" is another concept whose definition is the subject of debate, and it would be fair to say that this is why it has attracted many historians. By focusing on the various forms of the social cohesion and ties that arise from human relationships at every level — from the family to the state — irrespective of class, and thereby promoting a paradigmatic shift in the study of history which had conventionally concentrated on the analysis of class structure. This concept represented a breakthrough in the subsequent development of the study

---

<sup>36</sup> M. Agulhon, "Working Class and Sociability in France before 1848", in P. Thane, G. Crossick and R. Floud (eds.), *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (Cambridge, 1984), pp.37-66; T. Nakano, "20 Years of 'Sociabilité' Theory (in Japanese)," in Historical Science Society of Japan (ed.), *Historical Studies in Japan from 1980 to 2000: Trends and Perspectives, Changing Images of the State and Society*, (Aoki Shoten, 2003), p. 179.

<sup>37</sup> Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, pp. 137-138.

of social history.<sup>38</sup> The debate centred initially on European history, but it also sparked a debate that drew in historical researchers concerned with other regions, such as Japan and other Asian countries, and that looked at issues such as whether this concept that originated in France could be applied to other regions, and if so, would there be issues applying it elsewhere.<sup>39</sup>

Because *sociabilité* is not seen as something that is necessarily formed through investment linked to profit, it is conceptually different from social capital, which thinks of social relationships as "capital." Nevertheless, they overlap in that they both focus on the phenomena of trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks of cooperation. If it is not "capital," then it may have no bearing on the question of whether it is a public good or a private good, but one might dare to say that many historians who are interested in *sociabilité* began with a focus on private human relationships and networks. In that case, just as there are "cohesive relationships with form" that are institutionalized as organizations, there are "cohesive relationships without form" that are cultivated in places like public houses and coffee houses.<sup>40</sup> But even if the starting point is private social relationships, in most cases historians are ultimately interested in how these were connected to something that is "public." In this respect, it is closely connected to the research on "civil society" and "public sphere."<sup>41</sup> For example, "*sociabilité*," a French word, is generally not explicitly used in connection with British history. However, the term "associations" essentially refers to the same thing, and a major focus of study is how they were involved in the formation of "civil society" or "local self-government," and how, as agents of social welfare (e.g. charitable organizations, mutual aid organizations), they contributed to the creation of modern social security systems.<sup>42</sup>

The view that *sociabilité* does not automatically refer to the public good can be seen in the writings of Hiroyuki Ninomiya, who was a leader in the historical study of *sociabilité* in Japan. Ninomiya tried to capture the notion of *sociabilité* from two sides: "ties" and "shackles." While fostering solidarity, the relationships that bond people and organizations to each other also have aspects of exclusion, control, and subordination.<sup>43</sup> Few social groups are genuinely horizontal peer groups, and more often there is hierarchical strife. In the reality of history, cooperation have usually embraced some discrepancies and horizontal and vertical relationships

---

<sup>38</sup> H. Ninomiya, "The Scope of Sociabilité Theory (in Japanese)," in H. Ninomiya (ed.), *Forms of Connection: The Scope of Sociabilité* (in Japanese), (Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1995), pp. 3-20.

<sup>39</sup> M. Shibata, H. Ninomiya, et. al. (eds.), *Inquiries in World History, 4: Social Cohesion* (in Japanese) (Iwanami Shoten, 1989). This book includes discussions about social cohesion in not only the various areas of Europe, but also in China, India, and the Islamic world. For discussions on the relationship between the *sociabilité* concept and Asian and Japanese history, see essays in Ninomiya, *Forms of Connection*. This book was compiled based on the 1994 Western History Society symposium in Japan, and is helpful for becoming acquainted with the various arguments concerning *sociabilité*.

<sup>40</sup> Ninomiya, "Introduction", in *Inquiries in World History, 4: Social Cohesion* (in Japanese) p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. J. Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914* (London, 1993).

<sup>43</sup> Nakano, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

cannot be separated from each other. These vertical relationships become apparent when private *sociabilité* is being moulded into something public. Ninomiya brought the issue of norms being imposed and resisted in this process of social integration into the range of historical study of *sociabilité*.<sup>44</sup>

Thus historians have sought to grasp both the positives and negatives of social relationships and associations at every level, as well as their historical changes. There are certainly areas where historians' awareness of issues overlaps with the scope of social capital debates. Putnam has come to divide social capital into "bonding" and "bridging" types, and Michael Woolcock has introduced the concept of "linking" social capital to capture vertical relationships.<sup>45</sup> Theoretical work is being done on how to look at issues concerning hierarchy and inequality in the context of social capital theory.<sup>46</sup> In the meantime, an empirical approach that finds and examines concrete examples in history of the advantages and disadvantages that accrue to people through social relationships also has relevance. This is because depending on time, place, and occasions, they arise in different ways.

## Conclusion

The objective of this paper is to randomly consider common grounds for social capital debate and the work of historians. If there is any conclusion, it is that there are a variety of possible relationships between the two. As long as there are clues to such a relationship, there are opportunities for dialog that should be both interdisciplinary and international. French historian Braudel once described the relationship between historians and sociologists a "dialogue of the deaf."<sup>47</sup> As academics become increasingly specialized, dialog between not only history and sociology, but also between the various disciplines — and indeed even within disciplines — has become more difficult. History is divided into subject areas (e.g. political, social, economic, or cultural history), while it is also divided by era (e.g. ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary), and there are also the classical geographic divisions of "Japanese", "Oriental", and "Occidental" history. Even if most researchers desire interdisciplinary dialog, the reality is that there are few opportunities. It would be easy to dismiss the "social capital" concept out of hand for its vagueness, but another way of looking at it is that precisely because it is a controversial concept, it provides good opportunities for debate with researchers in other fields.

---

<sup>44</sup> Ninomiya, "Introduction", *Inquiries in World History, 4: Social Cohesion* (in Japanese) p. 14. See also the subsequent volume in this series, which dealt mainly with social integration, M. Shibata and H. Ninomiya, *et.al.*(eds.), *Inquiries in World History, 5: Norms and Integration* (in Japanese) (Iwanami Shoten, 1990).

<sup>45</sup> Field, *op.cit.*, p.73.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. Lin, *op.cit.* See also Lin's paper in this volume.

<sup>47</sup> Burke, *op.cit.*, p.3.